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Movie review

'The Plot to Kill JFK,' as slapped on celluloid

YOU CAN'T blame them for wanting to make a buck. And if it happens to involve President Kennedy's assassination, so what? Are the financiers of "Executive Action" any different from the New York importers who traded in Taiwanese miniatures of the Texas School Book Depository Building? *I'm* certainly in no position to throw the first stone: somewhere in my apartment are a dozen Nov. 23, 1963, newspapers with assassination headlines. I can remember trying to get a Dallas paper, but other souvenir hunters beat me to it. Souvenirs? Of an assassination? God . . .

But "Executive Action," opening today at 11 theaters in the Chicago area, claims a purpose larger than profits, promises an appeal beyond the morbid. Based on facts and the lack of adequate explanation for facts, "Executive Action" hypothesizes, in the form of a conventional thriller mixing melodrama and documentary film, that John Kennedy's assassination was arranged by a group of oil barons who believed that Kennedy was about to "lead the black revolution" along with The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., while selling out our nation to the Communists thru a test-ban treaty with the Russians and disengagement from Viet Nam. The white race will be finished, argues an oilman played by the late Robert Ryan.

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Ryan [left] and Lancaster in their roles as principal conspirators in "Executive Action": A hypothesis made more commercial and more credible since Nov. 22, 1963.

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ACCORDING to the Dalton Trumbo script, based primarily on research contained in Mark Lane's "Rush to Judgment," the assassination itself was carried out with the help of disaffected CIA agents eager to destroy Kennedy, who restricted their power after the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

"Executive Action" further argues that there were three riflemen shooting at the President: one from the sixth floor of the Book Depository, one from the roof of the adjoining Dallas County Records Building, and one from behind the picket fence atop the infamous grassy knoll.

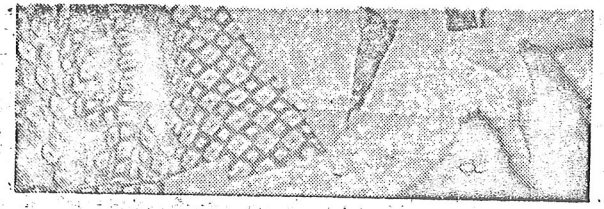
Further: Lee Harvey Oswald was not one of those riflemen; he was framed thru the use of a double and a mysterious friend who manipulated Oswald into unknowingly setting himself up for arrest.

Further: Jack Ruby's murder of Oswald was also arranged by the oilmen.

THE FILM'S arguments have been made more commercial and credible by recent events. The white-supremacy angle should interest the new flock of black filmgoers; the Watergate scandal has revealed all manner of double-dealing in government; and the energy crisis has made the oil baron a perfect patsy for just about every calamity except the 1973 Chicago Bears.

"Executive Action" should be judged on two levels: first as a thriller, second as a historical argument. The two are directly connected in that the film's quality as a thriller is the major determinant of its ability to reopen debate on the Warren Commission's investigation. For example: "Z" was successful as an indictment of the military regime in Greece because the audience became involved in its fiction-fact story, because its appeal as a thriller attracted to the theater persons besides those already disposed to hate the junta.

AND IT IS precisely on this point, as a conventional movie, that "Executive Action" stumbles badly. The script is so



Ryan [left] and Lancaster in their roles as principal conspirators in "Executive Action": A hypothesis made more commercial and more credible since Nov. 22, 1963.

heavy-handed in its portrayal of the oilmen, in its representation of causality, that one might think it was written by a man with a very small shoulder under his chip. And it was. Dalton Trumbo, a tragic victim of the McCarthy-led Hollywood backlist, lets his bitterness blunt his writing. His errors are elementary. In 1973, and especially in a movie with a subject and cause as serious as this one, you don't

TRIBUNE MINIREVIEW

Blunted instrument

★★½

"EXECUTIVE ACTION"

Directed by David Miller, screenplay by Dalton Trumbo based on a story by Donald Freed and Mark Lane, photographed by Robert Steadman, music by Randy Edelman; produced by Edward Lewis, Dan Bessie, and Gary Hofowitz; a National General release at neighborhood theaters. Rated PG.

THE CAST

Farrington	Burt Lancaster
Foster	Robert Ryan
Ferguson	Will Geer
Paulitz	Gilbert Green
Halliday	John Anderson
Oswald impostor	James MacColl
Jack Ruby	Oscar Oncidi

have a rich oilman, looking very much like a sinister Col. Sanders, sit in front of a television set, see Kennedy make a couple of predictable speeches, and only then agree to join the conspiracy. That's comic-book causality.

There are other questions raised by the script:

Who is this evil man, and why is he so necessary to Robert Ryan's plan? It appears he is needed to finance the operation. But Ryan has a private railway car, and he is able to retain Burt Lancaster as an executive hit-man; one would think that money would be no problem.

Who, for that matter, is the mysterious stranger, never identified in any way, so close to Oswald as to make Oswald do anything he or she wants? It appears that Trumbo or Lane has invented a *deux ex machina* to close a number of loopholes in the argument.

THERE ARE MORE questions for David Miller, the film's director:

If your goal, as you said in a recent interview, was to have the fictional material and stock newsreel footage "reach a certain point where you forget it's fiction and stock footage and think that it's all real," why photograph the fictional material in color and have the newsreel film in black-and-white? Why not make the whole thing black-and-white? Director Miller always introduces the actual Kennedy footage by having one of his fictional characters see it on television. Unfortunately, Miller neglects to frame the historical material inside a television screen, and the effect is to emphasize the dichotomy: Black-and-white footage means the real world, color pictures mean make-believe. An all black-and-white movie would have been startling and, because it deals with a 10-year-old event, psychologically valid.

Another problem: At the film's climax—the firing of the fatal bullets—director Miller recreates the Kennedy limousine and its occupants as seen thru the three riflemen's sights. This is done to reinforce the "three-gunmen theory," but unfortunately the doubles for the President and Mrs. Kennedy are anything but realistic. It breaks the movie's spell. And so does the clear photography thru the rifle sights; it doesn't mesh well with the actual footage, blurred and panicky, that precedes and follows it.

IF THIS LAST point seems a slight objection, one should realize that many of the same technical problems were mastered earlier this year by Fred Zinnemann in "The Day of the Jackal."

So all these things, and others, hurt "Executive Action" as a thriller. But what about it as an argument? The thesis of this film is a strong one. It raises doubt; its theory is plausible. What it deals with is, to some, the crime of this century.

More's the pity, then, that it's packaged too poorly to deserve the wide dissemination its authors may have hoped for, both as profit-takers and as polemicists. And that's why I am giving the film a mixed rating. "Executive Action" is a below-average realization of an important argument.

The argument, by the way, is presented with much more force in an eight-page flier that is to be handed out to persons who see the film. It reveals that President Johnson himself had doubts about the Warren Commission report, a fact that the film mentions only briefly in its titles.

PERSONS still troubled by the thought that we never were told the truth about the assassination of John Kennedy—and, for that matter, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and the Rev. Mr. King—would do well to read Bernard Fensterwald Jr.'s article in the November issue of Esquire, in which he summarizes the unexplained mysteries surrounding each of those crimes as well as the attempt on the life of Gov. George Wallace.

Fensterwald's article raises serious questions, but it also contains a piece of hopeful information: "Two crucial 'freedom of information' cases," he writes, "are being heard by the U. S. Court of Appeals . . . . one bearing on evidence in the murder of President Kennedy, the other on evidence in the murder of his brother. . . . Tho the public is generally unaware of these latest developments, the books are not closed on the assassinations, or the attempts, of the past 10 years. The truth is finally coming out."

Gene Siskel